5 Seyyed Hossein Nasr's Metaphysical Theodicy

Justin Cancelliere

Introduction

Notwithstanding the recent mainstreaming of postcolonial thought,[1] it bears repeating that not every problem is a problem for everyone. In the case of what is today referred to as the problem of evil, some scholars suggest that, despite the ancient provenance of specifically theological discourses on evil that are in many respects continuous with modern ones, it took until the Enlightenment for there to emerge *arguments from* evil for the inexistence of God.[2] Given the degree and extent to which intellectually serious people have since found such arguments compelling, what explains their late arrival, historically speaking?

Of course, all such questions pertaining to the causes of modernization are exceedingly complicated, making detailed discussion of them beyond the scope of these introductory remarks. It will, however, be helpful for present purposes to sketch the basic types of responses that these questions most commonly receive. Have human beings always possessed the same innate capacities, or do these capacities themselves change over time? For some thinkers, ancient and medieval people were simply less capable of disinterested rationality—generally speaking, and for whatever reason—than modern people are,[3] whereas for others, historical variation in the productions of human intellectual activity are explainable with reference primarily to factors extrinsic to the aptitude for such activity itself. In short, one can view the issue most fundamentally in terms of either a development (for

1 See, e.g., Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Idea of Provincializing Europe," in *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, ed. Dipesh Chakrabarty (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), introduction; Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, "Eurocentrism and Coloniality: The Question of Totality of Knowledge," in *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*, ed. Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), chapter 9.

2 See, e.g., Michael W. Hickson, "A Brief History of Problems of Evil," in *The Blackwell Companion to The Problem of Evil*, ed. Justin P. McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Snyder (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), chapter 1.

3 In addition to well-known figures like Hume, Marx, and Freud, one could mention thinkers such as Marquis de Condorcet, Auguste Comte, E. B. Tylor, and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

DOI: 10.4324/9781003371670-6

good or for ill) or a uniformity, with the most nuanced perspectives naturally taking account of both aspects and giving each its due.

For the contemporary philosopher and scholar of Islam Seyyed Hossein Nasr, whose comments on the problem of evil form the subject of this essay, it is not that the ancients and medievals possessed a lower level of critical acumen than their modern counterparts and thus were unable to fully appreciate the potential scope of the problem of evil, and nor is it true that they were able to but opted not to express themselves openly. Rather, he makes the claim—radical by today's standards—that in the last analysis the problem of evil is only inaccurately considered a genuine problem to begin with,[4] which is to say that he views the emergence of what were referred to above as "arguments from evil" as symptomatic of an intellectual decline.[5]

Although Nasr does take the problem very seriously as a matter of both historical and contemporary significance,[6] he has not been shy to say that "if all men could be taught metaphysics . . . there would be no atheists and agnostics."[7] For Nasr, this conviction applies just as much to nonbelief caused by the existence of evil in the world as it does to any other line of reasoning that might cause a person to adopt skeptical attitudes towards God. In other words, Nasr's thought moves decidedly against the grain in associating metaphysics not only with the ability to resolve difficulties thought by many to be irresolvable, but also and above all with direct knowledge of and therefore certainty regarding the reality of the Divine. According to him, the heart of metaphysics consists not in discursive reasoning—what Plato called *dianoia*—but rather in what is termed gnosis, or the putatively divine form of knowledge typically described as non-dual in nature and therefore infallible.[8]

While it is true that epistemologies founded upon gnosis are not wholly unfamiliar to contemporary Westerners—this being due in large part to the impetus the 1960s and 1970s counterculture gave to the popularization of Eastern metaphysical

4 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Garden of Truth* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 55.

5 Nasr therefore distinguishes between a certain type of intellectual *sophistication* and what he takes to be *intellectuality* properly so called.

6 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Need for a Sacred Science* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 9. See also Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 143.

7 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Introduction," in *The Essential Frithjof Schuon*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2005), 32. See also Nasr, *Need for a Sacred Science*, 9.

8 To forestall common misunderstandings regarding the notion of infallibility here, it is important to note that gnosis in the strictly metaphysical sense is said to have a single object, namely the Real Itself. So, for thinkers who view gnosis in the way that Nasr does, the gnostic's infallibility extends no further than the gnosis itself, which is to say that he or she, as an individual, is infallible neither epistemically nor, a fortiori, as regards character. According to Frithjof Schuon, one of Nasr's teachers: "The Intellect is infallible in itself, but this does not prevent the human receptacle from being subject to contingencies which, though they cannot modify the intrinsic nature of intelligence, can nonetheless be opposed to its full actualization and to the purity of its radiance" (Frithjof Schuon, "In the Wake of the Fall," in *Science and the Myth of Progress*, ed. Mehrdad M. Zarandi [Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2003], 24). See also René Guénon, *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines*, trans. Marco Pallis (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2001), 76.

doctrines[9]—it goes without saying that the concept of gnosis taken as signifying a mode of knowing that is as real as it is valid remains at best marginal in mainstream philosophical and theological circles. As a general rule, then, contemporary discussion of the problem of evil tends to remain confined to the disciplines of philosophy of religion and philosophical theology, both of which conventionally take certain characteristically modern postulates at face value.

In the present context, one thinks in particular of the influence and significance of Kant—the "all-destroyer" as he came to be called by his contemporaries—whose self-styled "Copernican revolution" in metaphysics[10] proved so successful in causing many thinking people to abandon the traditional epistemologies that, if not overtly centered on gnosis, at least contained openings onto it.[11] Furthermore, it is important to mention the complicating factor of ambivalent or even hostile attitudes towards gnosis stretching back into pre-modern times, particularly among Christian authors who either felt threatened by it or—as in the case of what Nasr would characterize as the pseudo-gnosis of historical Gnosticism—had perfectly valid reasons for deeming it heretical.

In contrast to those contemporary thinkers who disregard gnosis in engaging with the problem of evil, Nasr places it at the heart of his theodicy, since for him no fully satisfactory theodicy is possible without it.[12] Insofar as one approaches the problem exclusively from the perspective of either exoteric theology or rationalistic philosophy, it is bound to remain insoluble according to Nasr,[13] who explains its historically corrosive effect on religious faith in the West in terms of a lack of access to sufficiently integral expositions of metaphysics, or to what he alternatively refers to as "sacred science" (*scientia sacra*).[14] Moreover, the qualification "integral" here is significant given the fact that anyone with a library card or an internet connection is now free to peruse the whole of Plato or Plotinus. For if, as Nasr claims, metaphysics involves more than just book learning, the situation arguably becomes one of compound ignorance whenever a human collectivity suffers from a dearth not only of people who are capable of penetrating down to the real

9 See, e.g., Harry Oldmeadow, *Journeys East: 20th Century Western Encounters with Eastern Religious Traditions* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2004), 269; Morgan Shipley, *Psychedelic Mysticism: Transforming Consciousness, Religious Experiences, and Visionary Peasants in Postwar America* (London: Lexington Books, 2015), 2; Paul Oliver, *Hinduism and the 1960s: The Rise of a Counter-Culture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

10 See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 110.

11 Consider, for example, the way Plotinus approached and made use of Aristotle, or, moving in the other direction, as it were, the way St. Thomas Aquinas was influenced by Pseudo-Dionysius. For the latter, see Fran O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1992).

12 Nasr, *Need for a Sacred Science*, 9. To be clear, one need not "possess" gnosis oneself to understand why there is evil in the world; a theoretical understanding of metaphysics suffices. But without the water of gnosis the flower of metaphysics eventually dries up and dies.

13 Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 143.

14 Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 143.

intentions underlying this or that text theoretically but also of those individuals who have assimilated the relevant truths existentially.

This point leads to the other half, so to speak, of Nasr's metaphysical theodicy, the import of which extends beyond the necessary doctrinal considerations into the practical concerns of human life. For Nasr, comprehensively addressing the problem of evil requires taking account of the human *experience* of evil. His theodicy therefore has much to say about how one should understand the reality of *suffering*. In fact, there is a sense in which Nasr is concerned more with suffering than he is with evil, since an evil in and of itself is just that, whereas an evil suffered with the right intention purifies the one afflicted by it. So even if, unlike some thinkers, Nasr does not find it necessary to appeal via the purificatory aspect of suffering to the providential role played by evil in the cosmos in order to "vindicate" God, the holism of his perspective nevertheless demands drawing the various connections that he takes to obtain between the objective and subjective aspects of any given phenomenon—in this case between evil as a fact about the world "out there" and evil as productive of suffering.

As for the contemporary relevance of Nasr's theodicy, it consists first and foremost, one might argue, in the timelessness of its essential content, which must always be relevant ipso facto, at least insofar as one affirms the principle of the "timeliness of the timeless,"[15] and specifically inasmuch as human beings are always and everywhere suffering. But regarding the question of relevance in its more extrinsic aspects, namely those pertaining to the social and political domains, one could mention the sense in which Nasr's approach to evil and suffering might serve as an antidote to hysteria, the destructive power of which doubtless becomes exacerbated in "information societies" and "internet cultures." Anyone who has lived and reached some degree of maturity will know the power of negative experiences and influences to consume a life and waste it. If a person were to understand not only why evil exists but also that it must exist, he or she would be in the best position possible to conquer it, since equanimity born of knowledge obviously conduces to effective action, and action in the absence of knowledge is effective only by accident, as it were.[16]

The following is divided into four sections. The first will outline Nasr's solution to the problem of evil; the second will present his views on suffering; and the remaining two will flesh out this presentation of his theodicy by exploring certain ways in which it might be elaborated upon—on the basis of his own principles—in order to account for aspects of the questions of evil and suffering that are only briefly addressed in his writings. In particular, I will examine the ability of Nasr's theodicy to account for evil insofar as it appears as an active force rather than as a privative phenomenon, and I will discuss the relationship between the problem

15 For which see M. Ali Lakhani, *The Timeless Relevance of Traditional Wisdom* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2010), vii.

16 See, e.g., Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 91.

of evil and that of free will and predestination, which Nasr touches upon but does not develop.

Implications of Infinitude

In Nasr's exposition of metaphysical truth, God, who is the supreme Good, is said to be both absolute and infinite, with goodness in this context entailing munificence, absoluteness entailing oneness and simplicity, and infinitude entailing freedom from all limitation. For Nasr, reflecting upon these divine attributes taken together suffices to solve the problem of evil, which he views as proceeding from an insufficiently metaphysical conception of God's nature. In order to understand what he means, it will first be helpful to say more about how exactly he understands the nature of metaphysics.

According to Nasr, metaphysics is not properly speaking a branch of philosophy; rather, it comprises philosophy's very root as the highest of all sciences, which is to say that metaphysics is the science of ultimate reality.[17] In using the term science here, which Nasr intends in its pre-modern sense, he means to distinguish his conception of metaphysics from that of thinkers who see in it nothing beyond unverifiable speculation. For Nasr, there are two main problems with this view: first is its Kantianism, which he rejects,[18] and second is the notion that metaphysics is limited to mental activity alone.[19] As already mentioned, the heart of metaphysics as understood by Nasr is gnosis, which is a mode of knowing that transcends thought.[20] While gnosis in the broadest sense does admit of degrees,[21] the lower degrees derive their reality from—or deserve the designation "gnosis" on account of—their participation in the highest degree, which has as one of its preconditions the contemplative cessation not only of thought but also of the operations of the soul's other faculties, namely sensory perception, memory, imagination, and even intuition, which constitutes a kind of anticipation of gnosis.[22]

17 Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 132.

18 Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 42.

19 See, e.g., Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 34, 132, 261, 313, 325.

20 For an excellent study of gnosis (*maʿrifa*) in the context of Islamic spirituality, see Reza Shah-Kazemi, "The Notion and Significance of *Maʿrifa* in Sufism," *Oxford Journal of Islamic Studies* 13, no. 2 (2002): 155–181.

21 Nasr does usually use the term gnosis in this broad sense and even simply identifies it with traditional metaphysics (see, e.g., Nasr, *Need for a Sacred Science*, 54; Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 50n13). But it is clear from his writings that the essence of gnosis consists in the non-dual knowledge of the Divine, with which the transcendent center point of the human state mysteriously coincides (see Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 1–4). As he says, "this knowledge . . . is strictly speaking not human" (*Knowledge and the Sacred*, 326).

22 For discussion of this possibility of man's becoming annihilated in God (*fanāʾ*), see Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 134–136. For a concise statement of it, see Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 326. The relationship between *fanāʾ* and subsistence in God (*baqāʾ*) is beyond the scope of this essay.

It can therefore be seen that insofar as metaphysics involves doctrines, or, more loosely, the human intellect's capacity for speculative theorizing, these aspects can only be "outward" vis-à-vis what is essentially an inexpressible "state" of consciousness.[23] When a metaphysician in the Platonic sense of the term thinks, it can only be either to clothe truths in mental forms for the sake of assimilating and expressing them[24] or to untie mental knots that obstruct the supra-rational realization of these truths to begin with, as in the "midwifery" of Socrates.[25] And given the fact that the attainment of this special sort of knowledge entails the extinction—however momentary[26]—of the subject that knows, it can also be seen that the object of gnosis necessarily appears from without as a kind of emptiness or void, hence the whole phenomenon of apophatic mysticism.

To return then to the abovementioned divine attributes upon which Nasr bases his theodicy, we are now in a good position to understand how his conception of God might differ from that of a theologian or rationalist philosopher, neither of whose methods go beyond the subject-object dichotomy presupposed by discursive thinking. For Nasr, the oneness of God demands the ultimately illusory nature of any and all dualities—a non-duality that, among innumerable other implications, entails God's not being limited by His own divinity, so to speak. When one thinks of God, it is natural to imagine Him as being somewhere "out there"—perhaps seated upon His throne at the summit of the cosmic hierarchy—which is not wrong from Nasr's point of view. But to stop there risks making an idol of the world, since to think of God only as He exists in relation to His creation contradicts His absoluteness.[27] In Nasr's metaphysics, God is absolute with a true absoluteness, which is to say that in and of itself the world is devoid of being. And God is infinite with a true infinitude, which is to say that He is not bound by His own unboundedness.

Now, in Nasr's explication of this second principle in particular, God's infinitude can be thought of in terms of possibility, in which case one can say that the Divine, which is All-Possibility, comprehends all that is possible, including the possibility of Its own negation,[28] or of the mysterious imposition of limits upon that which is always essentially free in Itself; such, for Nasr, is the origin of the world in God. From this metaphysical vantage point, which could be called emanationist,[29]

23 See Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 134, 151.

24 See Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 151–152.

25 See Plato, *Theaetetus*, 148e–151d, trans. M. J. Levett, revised Myles Burnyeat, in Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. John Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 165–168.

26 "Realization of the Self, being im-mediate, strictly speaking transcends time, arriving like a flash of all-illuminating light: The question of how much time is spent in that state of enlightenment is immaterial" (Reza Shah-Kazemi, *Paths to Transcendence: According to Shankara, Ibn Arabi, and Meister Eckhart* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2006), 43.

27 See Nasr, *Need for a Sacred Science*, 8.

28 Nasr, *Need for a Sacred Science*, 9–10; Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 134; Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 54.

29 Nasr does not deny creation *ex nihilo*, but he does explain it in metaphysical terms as referring to the existentiation of preexistent possibilities, which from the point of view of the created order do

the existentiation of the cosmos entails separation from its source, which in turn necessitates the appearance of evil—whether literally or figuratively at any given level of reality—since only God is good.[30] More specifically, Nasr characterizes the creation of the world as a "projection toward nothingness" and evil as "a kind of 'crystallization of nothingness,' real on its own level of existence but an illusion before God, who alone is Reality as such."[31] Correctly understanding evil from Nasr's point of view therefore requires avoiding two pitfalls—one being the denial of the reality of evil insofar as it is real, and the other being the false attribution of reality to it insofar as it is not. On the side of the subject, then, theodicy demands an epistemology based upon discernment between the Absolute and the relative, while on the side of the object it demands ontological hierarchy, or gradation in the category of being (*tashkīk al-wujūd*, in Islamic philosophical terms).

Here one might ask, however, why this particular possibility—that of cosmogenesis—is actually brought to pass, given the close conceptual relationship between possibility and contingency.[32] While Nasr's metaphysics does in fact distinguish between possibilities of manifestation and possibilities of non-manifestation,[33] the world belongs to the former category on account of God's goodness, as it is in the nature of the good to communicate and give of itself.[34] So while on the level of abstract attributes like absoluteness and infinitude their very meanings imply God's not being limited by them (which could be expressed by saying that the reality of the Absolute subsumes and encompasses that of the relative, and that the reality of the Infinite subsumes and encompasses that of the finite), on the level of God's positive qualities or perfections—for example goodness or beauty—there is a sense in which His own nature constrains Him to be just those things.[35] In a word, God cannot will not to be God,[36] but He is not "imprisoned in the castle of

---

indeed appear as "nothing" prior to their being made manifest. See Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 232–233.

30 Nasr, *Need for a Sacred Science*, 10. In saying that only God is good, Nasr means that only God is good absolutely, since naturally not all separation from God (in the technical sense of an ontological disjunction) can be considered evil. For example, he says explicitly that "the element of evil [does not] appear in any of the worlds still close to the Divine Proximity" (*Knowledge and the Sacred*, 144). Moreover, he often speaks not of evil but of "what manifests itself as evil on a particular plane of reality," "what appears on the human plane as evil," "what theologically is called evil," etc. (*Knowledge and the Sacred*, 144; *Need for a Sacred Science*, 14n5; *Garden of Truth*, 54).

31 Nasr, *Need for a Sacred Science*, 10. See also Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 144.

32 For which see Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 139.

33 See Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 140.

34 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Evil as the Absence of the Good," in *Voices of Islam*, ed. Vincent J. Cornell (Westport: Praeger, 2007), 2:134; Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 134.

35 It is not that these qualities possess any reality apart from God such that a perfect being would be required to instantiate or exemplify them perfectly in order to be perfect. Rather, the divine Reality simply is what It is, and to speak of necessity in this context is simply to register this fact theoretically. For Nasr, it would be absurd to posit the existence of immutable criteria independent of God, since the root reality of every valid criterion is God Himself.

36 Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 144.

transcendence"[37] either. God is not free not to create,[38] but it is He who imposes this limitation upon His own self in virtue of His freedom from all limitation. As Nasr has explained at length in various works, integral metaphysics distinguishes between two main levels or aspects of divinity—namely, God as pure Being, or the "personal God" of theology, and God as Beyond Being or the ultimately Real, which is metaphysically infinite[39]—and it is in fact the failure to make this distinction, according to Nasr, that leads to so many theological aporias, including the problem of evil.[40] From the perspective of the divine Essence, which is beyond both Being and, a fortiori, good and evil, God does not oppose the existence of evil as such.[41] But He does oppose all concrete evils on the level of His Will, which belongs not to the Essence but to its first determination as Being.[42]

Assuming now the metaphysical necessity of both the existence of the cosmos and the presence of evil in it, a further question may arise—namely, that of the amount as well as types and degrees of evil found in the world. Could not the world have less evil in it than it does, and could it not exclude the more heinous types of evil, and especially the most horrible degrees of any given type? Since this question will be revisited in the final section of this essay, I will only sketch some of the relevant principles here for the sake of rounding out our picture of Nasr's solution to the problem of evil.

First, from Nasr's point of view, God's creation is overwhelmingly good and beautiful, so someone pondering the problem of evil must account for the obvious fact of people's differing experiences of the world while at the same time striving for disinterestedness, which of course excludes any kind of relativism. According to Nasr, the more one is able to step back from the particularities of this or that limited experience—whether it be one's own or that of someone else with which one is preoccupied—the greater will be one's ability to concretely perceive the ultimate unreality of evil in the face of the Good.[43] Naturally someone immersed in evil will be tempted to see evil everywhere in spite of the fact that, as Nasr says,

37 Paul Eduaro Muller-Ortega, *The Triadic Heart of Śiva: Kaula Tantricism of Abhinavagupta in the Non-Dual Shaivism of Kashmir* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 138.

38 "The Absolute and Infinite Reality . . . cannot but manifest and create" (Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 144).

39 See Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 136, 156n15. For extended discussion of the notion of metaphysical infinitude, see René Guénon, "Infinity and Possibility," in *The Multiple States of the Being*, trans. Henry D. Fohr; ed. Samuel D. Fohr (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2001), chapter 1.

40 See Nasr, *Need for a Sacred Science*, 9, 14n5. According to Nasr, "Integral metaphysics is fully aware of the necessity, on their own level, of the theological formulations which insist upon the hiatus between God and man or the Creator and the world. The metaphysical knowledge of unity comprehends the theological one in both a figurative and literal sense, while the reverse is not true" (*Knowledge and the Sacred*, 138).

41 Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 144.

42 Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 144.

43 See Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 55–56.

"the ugly is passing accident, while . . . beauty is abiding substance."[44] Second, while Nasr affirms the doctrine of predestination, he does not take it to contradict free will, which, for him, people must have if moral evil is to have any meaning.[45] So if certain forms of moral evil are found in the world, an important part of the explanation is simply that God made man free to do as he pleases. Last, although Nasr says that it can be understood perfectly well why God, who is pure goodness, created a world in which there is evil,[46] it is not possible to understand an individual evil in and of itself,[47] since evil is not only characterized by ontological privation, which all things share vis-à-vis God,[48] but is also ontologically insubstantial[49]—a tenebrous mode of existence that manifests itself epistemically as unintelligibility. At best, man can only understand this or that evil in its providential context, for the goodness of God demands that all of what appears as evil contribute to and ultimately be effaced by a greater good.[50]

Nevertheless, human beings do not possess God's measures.[51] It is thus that, according to Nasr, the problem of evil is best solved by living a life that would make possible the dawning of sacred knowledge within one's own being.[52] As he says, "This realization or actualization is the best possible way of understanding the nature of the Good and the why of terrestrial human existence which, being removed from God, cannot but be marred by the fragmentation, dissipation, and privation that appears as evil and that is as real as that plane of reality upon which it manifests itself."[53]

Light Become Fire

If the key to Nasr's solution to the problem of evil lies in his conception of the divine nature, the key to his approach to suffering lies in his conception of the nature

44 Nasr, *Need for a Sacred Science*, 121. Elsewhere he explains that evil "remains always limited and bound while goodness is unlimited and opens unto the Infinite" (*Knowledge and the Sacred*, 145). See also Nasr, "Absence of the Good," 138. For the linguistic association between beauty and goodness and ugliness and evil in Arabic, see Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 277n33.

45 Nasr, "Absence of the Good," 134.

46 Nasr, *Need for a Sacred Science*, 9.

47 Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 145.

48 Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 144.

49 Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 145. See also Nasr, "Absence of the Good," 131; Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 84.

50 Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 145–146. In the Quran, the story of Moses and Khiḍr (18:65–82) serves as a kind of locus classicus for this point.

51 In the language of the Quran: "It may be that you hate a thing though it be good for you, and it may be that you love a thing though it be evil for you. God knows, and you know not" (Q 2:216). All translations of Quranic verses are taken from Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Caner Dagli, Maria Dakake, Joseph Lumbard, and Mohammed Rustom (eds.), *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: HarperOne, 2015).

52 Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 145.

53 Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 145.

of man. In Nasr's anthropology, the human state is fundamentally determined by two aspects or poles.[54] On the one hand, man is made in the image of God—a truth that Islam expresses through its doctrine of man's vicegerency (*khilāfa*), according to which man is the representative (*khalīfa*) of God on earth. On the other hand, man is only ever God's servant (*ʿabd*)—a status entailed by his utter poverty in the face of the Divine. For Nasr, the purpose of human life is fulfilled by giving each of these two aspects of the soul its due so that one recovers his or her primordial nature (*fiṭra*), which serves as a kind of gate opening out onto the liberating perfection exemplified for Muslims by the Prophet Muḥammad.[55]

Now given the fact that every positive quality admits of being inverted and made into a vice, man qua vicegerent is in danger of becoming proud, and man qua servant is in danger of becoming abject.[56] So vicegerency, which pertains to the "divine spark" within man,[57] and servitude, which pertains to his creatureliness, must interpenetrate and inform each other in order for this polarity to be resolved into a higher unity. At the same time, Nasr is careful to explain a certain asymmetry whereby servitude precedes and is presupposed by vicegerency.[58] From one point of view, all human beings are both representative and servant whether they are aware of it or not. But from another point of view, there is a sense in which all people are called to be servants, whereas not all people are called to be representatives.[59]

For the purpose of understanding Nasr's account of suffering, one could say that, from the first of these two perspectives, it is the unresolved tension between the divine and creaturely aspects of the human state that causes suffering in the most fundamental sense,[60] whereas, from the second perspective, it is caused by the need to sacrifice the lower self in order to attain to the higher self,[61] or rather the one, true Self, alienation from which renders all happiness fleeting and ultimately false. In short, man's vicegerency causes him to suffer through its perversion as vanity and pride, and his servitude causes him to suffer through his placing himself in the service of the wrong master, with the underlying ailment being one in any case. In the concise expression of Nasr: "The cause of all separation, division, otherness, and ultimately suffering is ignorance . . . and the cure knowledge."[62]

54 See, e.g., Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam* (New York: HarperOne, 2004), 13; Nasr, *Need for a Sacred Science*, 134.

55 See Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 21–22.

56 For precisions on the notions of pride and humility, see Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 126–127.

57 See, e.g., Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 12.

58 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Life and Thought* (Chicago: ABC International Group, 2001), 16.

59 The intention here is to highlight the question of vocation in connection with the highest possibilities implied by the notion of vicegerency. Of course all people are so called in principle. For clarifications regarding the distinction between the common people (*ʿawāmm*) and the spiritual elite (*khawāṣṣ*), see Nasr, *Heart of Islam*, 177. See also Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 319–320.

60 For the soul's yearning for peace "beyond all tension and duality," see Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 78.

61 For which sacrifice see, e.g., Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 97.

62 Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 7.

As for all the forms of suffering imposed upon man from without, by his environment, these are explainable from two main points of view—one objective or macrocosmic and the other subjective or microcosmic—although in each case it is really just a question of starting points and emphases. From the objective point of view, which comprises an aspect of subjectivity, man's experience of the world must involve suffering on account of the world's ontological status, which entails not only biological imperfection and decay but also a multiplicity of goods both real and apparent. Insofar as man participates along with other animals in the state of embodiment, he will experience illness, injury, and death.[63] And insofar as he is distinct from other animals in possessing the freedom to choose, individual people are liable to suffer the negative consequences of any and all wrong choices, whether made by them or not. Alternatively, from the subjective point of view, which comprises an aspect of objectivity, the nature of the human state demands suffering in virtue of its imperative of perfection. In Islamic terms, man is unique among creatures on account of God's having "taught Adam the names" (Q 2:31). According to Nasr, "[This] means that God has placed within human nature an intelligence that is central and the means by which he can know all things. It also means that human beings themselves are the theophany, or visible manifestation, of all of God's Names."[64] Thinking in terms of the human vocation, then, one could say that the perfection of God demands the perfection of man. But since man is not one in the same way God is—obviously—his being qualified by God's perfections, of which the divine Names are descriptions, involves a passage or movement from potentiality to actuality.[65] In order to be perfect, man must be free, but freedom exercised by an imperfect creature in a domain characterized by multiplicity perforce involves the possibility of error, which, as already mentioned, forms one of the roots of suffering.[66]

Turning now from the fact of human suffering to the details of its role in the quest for happiness, it is first important to point out that Nasr's emphasis on knowledge should not be taken to imply any denigration of the spiritual significance of love. On the contrary, not only does Nasr draw explicit connections between love

63 See, e.g., Nasr, *Need for a Sacred Science*, 107.

64 Nasr, *Heart of Islam*, 13.

65 For Nasr's situation of this notion (*al-takhalluq bi-akhlāq Allāh*) vis-à-vis the concepts of annihilation in God (*fanāʾ*), subsistence in God (*baqāʾ*), and spiritual realization (*taḥqīq*), see Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 135–136.

66 Regarding the question of animal suffering, which features prominently in certain formulations of the "evidential" problem of evil, it could be said that, just as man suffers along with other animals insofar as all animals are by definition both conscious and subject to the limitations of corporeality, so too—or even more fundamentally and profoundly—do non-human animals suffer on account of their ontological proximity to the human state, the reality of which they both manifest and participate in; cosmic centrality (that of the human state) entails both a maximum of blessing and a maximum of potential peril. It is also worth noting that, in Islam, it is believed on the basis of a hadith that animals will be resurrected and given just recompense on the Day of Judgment.

and suffering in the context of the spiritual life,[67] but he also explains how, at the highest level, the realities of knowledge and love coincide—an identity that entails their inextricability in the realm of relativity.[68] Thus, in interpreting his claim that the cause of suffering is ignorance and the cure knowledge, knowledge must be understood here as encompassing not only direct intellectual apprehension, which is non-discursive,[69] but also the concomitants of this apprehension on the level of the soul, both a priori and a posteriori. On the one hand, the notion of seeking of course implies desire, and in the case of the sincere search for true knowledge it further implies a love that is pure, or a purifying love, since knowledge is not something cheap.[70] On the other hand, the reality of attainment implies both compassion and generosity, since divine knowledge is intrinsically good, and the inward being of the true gnostic is not cluttered with anything that could obstruct the outward radiation of this good. As Nasr explains, "The heart of the saint is the source of a light resulting from his inner illumination and of a warmth issuing from the fire of the love of God. Knowledge and love at this level are united in a single reality, like the light and heat of a fire, the locus of this sacred fire being the heart."[71]

Now just as, subjectively speaking, the comprehensiveness of the human state demands the possibility of vice, so too does the totality of cosmic manifestation demand ambiguity on the level of objective phenomena. It is thus that fire can both benefit and harm, and that, by analogy, the imperishable fire comprising man's very center mysteriously becomes capable of burning him—a possibility opened up by

67 See Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 64.

68 In *The Garden of Truth*—the work in which Nasr has the most to say about love—he says that without the fire of love life "becomes deprived of value" (61); that the Truth cannot be reached without love (70); and that the one who has not loved has not lived (70). For the relationship between knowledge and love, see, e.g., Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 313–315.

69 Discussion of the modalities of such apprehension is beyond the scope of this essay. One could refer to the two primary, paradigmatic modes as "Platonic" and "Aristotelian," since in both cases intellection involves the collapse of the distinction between subject and object.

70 See Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 60.

71 Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "The Heart of the Faithful Is the Throne of the All-Merciful," in *Paths to the Heart: Sufism and the Christian East*, ed. James S. Cutsinger (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2004), 39. These notions of luminosity and radiation are helpful for appreciating the relevance of Nasr's theodicy to any and all people, regardless of the degree to which they are intellectually inclined. Some might wonder, for example, whether the consolation of the sage is a wholly private affair, or if it can be communicated in a compassionate way to those who lack it. From the point of view of Nasr's philosophy, a metaphysician may very well be blessed with the ability to convey beneficial knowledge to people in a language they can understand; there is nothing about essential truths that requires their being expressed in an arcane way. But prior to the question of any good deed for Nasr is always that of a person's underlying spiritual state, since, as it is said in Islam, "actions are according to their intentions." For him, the root precondition of all true service is being fully present—something only possible through spiritual realization. One need not understand metaphysics to benefit from someone who does and who has found peace through the "path of knowledge." Not all metaphysicians are saints, and not all saints are metaphysicians, but there are types of people for whom neither sainthood nor even posthumous salvation is possible without metaphysics.

the scission between subject and object, precisely. It is not without reason, then, that Nasr speaks not only of the fire of love but also of the fire of the passions.[72]

From the point of view of this symbolism, the crucial question for man in his quest for happiness is that of his well-faring in respect of the fire within him. For what does this fire burn, with what does he feed it, and in what manner does it finally burn *him*? Insofar as it burns with the love of God, man sacrifices himself at the altar of this love, which in consuming him frees him of the dross of his own separative existence.[73] For such a person, the alchemy of love makes a medicine of suffering regardless of its proximate cause. If it comes from without, then it aids the lover in abandoning that which will never fully satisfy him, and if it comes from within, it aids him in abandoning his own self for that which will.[74] Contrariwise, insofar as man succumbs to the fire of his passions, which he feeds with gratifications while heedless of God, he is really only feeding it with his self,[75] which in being so consumed is condemned to suffer in vain. For Nasr, whose perspective situates ascetical attitudes in the context of the path of knowledge,[76] man is not asked to completely suppress his appetites, which have positive functions in accordance with God's goodness and wisdom. But justice does demand disciplining them for the sake of placing them at the service of man's higher faculties. Man cannot escape being burned, since the fire of Reality is one.[77] But the lower modalities of this fire must be kept within their proper bounds lest their blaze blind him from the truth of his situation. In the case of the lover of God, then, he casts himself into the fire that liberates, whereas the lover of his own self casts himself into the fire of Hell,[78] "whose fuel is men and stones" (Q 2:24).

Inversion and Excess

In suffering on account of evils—whether those be found within us or outside of us, and whether they be evil literally or metaphorically—human beings doubtless experience certain evils not just as privations of this or that good but as active forces in their own right. For example, as we just saw, there obviously exists an active element in man's surrendering himself to his own passions. Not only does man

72 See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr*, ed. William Chittick (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2007), 32–33; Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 96, 116.

73 See Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 70.

74 See Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 63–64, 120.

75 See Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 96. According to Q 10:44, "God does not wrong human beings in the least, but rather human beings wrong themselves."

76 See, e.g., Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 131, 171.

77 Nasr occasionally refers to the classical Sufi tripartition of the stages of the acquisition of sacred knowledge (itself rooted in the Quran), according to which the path can be envisaged as proceeding from the "lore of certainty" (*ʿilm al-yaqīn*), or hearing about fire, to the "eye of certainty" (*ʿayn al-yaqīn*), or seeing fire, to the "truth of certainty" (*ḥaqq al-yaqīn*), or being consumed by fire (Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 30–31, 33; Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 325; Nasr, *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man* [Chicago: ABC International Group, 2001], 95n7).

78 See Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 96.

harbor within himself "the self that incites to evil" (*al-nafs al-ammāra bi'l-sūʾ*), but he is also free, so that even his passive attitudes with respect to this self involve some degree of activity. In the context of Nasr's theodicy, which underscores the privative aspect of evil, how should we understand evil as it is sometimes encountered—namely, as consciously subversive or malicious? In what follows, I will address this question before turning to the relationship between theodicy and the free will/predestination problematic, the intention being to explore some ways in which Nasr's discussion of the problem of evil might be expanded upon and tested against certain objections.

Even though Nasr's focus on metaphysics, ontology, and cosmology in his explanation of evil very naturally results in a foregrounding of evil's ontological insubstantiality, his writings do contain keys for helping his readers understand how the relative reality of evil—a fact that he emphasizes repeatedly[79]—is able to be experienced so viscerally. For example, in *Knowledge and the Sacred*, Nasr writes that "the doctrine of *māyā* or *ḥijāb* . . . explains evil as privation and separation from the Good and also as an element contributing to a greater good, although within a particular ambience or plane of existence, evil remains evil as a result of either privation *or excess*."[80] Furthermore, in this same work he explains how the cosmogenic irradiation of Being entails not only the appearance of privative modalities for the possibilities contained *in divinis* but also the reflection and thus inversion of these same possibilities in the cosmic mirror, or "the mirror of nothingness."[81] Although in itself such inversion is neutral, Nasr explicitly identifies it as one of cosmological preconditions of human perversity,[82] from which point of view one might imagine the just-mentioned excess as a kind of caricature of the superabundant plenitude of Being Itself.

On a more basic level, though, excess in its negative sense refers to the blameworthy overstepping of a limit. When someone perpetrates excesses, what is the nature of the limit that is being transgressed? From the religious point of view, it is of course the limits established by God as expressed in His Law that are violated by the wrongdoer. But as Nasr points out, one can and must distinguish between specifically religious conceptions of evil, which are characterized by a certain degree of relativity, and the spiritual significance of evil, which is universal.[83] From this more fundamental perspective, the violation is against the limits set by the nature of the human state itself.[84]

79 Nasr, *Need for a Sacred Science*, 10; Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 145; Nasr, "Absence of the Good," 133; Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 83–84.

80 Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 145 (emphasis added).

81 Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 140, 201.

82 "The fall of man upon the earth, like the descent of a symbol from a higher plane of reality, means both reflection and inversion which in the case of man leads to perversion" (Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 176).

83 Nasr, "Absence of the Good," 136. See also Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 83–84.

84 Consider Q 2:57: "They wronged Us not, but themselves did they wrong."

As we just saw, the human vocation involves striving to perfect both servitude and vicegerency, which constitute the poles of man's primordial nature or *fiṭra*. To understand how it is that evil appears as an active force in the world in spite of having no real ontological foundation, it is necessary to situate these anthropological terms in their cosmological context. In Nasr's cosmology, all that is other than God (*mā siwā Allāh*) comprises at once mirrors reflecting His Face and veils hiding Its splendor.[85] The existentiation of the cosmos can therefore be envisaged in terms of a progressive veiling of the one, true Reality, with each veil becoming more and more opaque the closer this "tendency toward nothingness," as Nasr calls it, nears its terminus, which can never be reached precisely on account of its being nothing.[86]

To link now this notion of the veil (*ḥijāb*) with that of the *fiṭra*, or more specifically with that of man's vicegerency, we can start by saying that, normatively speaking, and considered in relation to the entelechies of other creatures, man's function in the cosmos is to manifest God in a central fashion, or to reflect not just one or more of the divine Names but the Supreme Name—*Allāh*—which contains all of the others.[87] The upshot of this divine intention in the domain of the limited and the multiple is that the reconciliation of all oppositions characteristic of divinity finds its reflection in the icon of man, who "squares the circle" of creation by manifesting that which is highest in the very midst of what is lowest. In thus fulfilling his purpose as the jewel in the crown of the cosmos, man renders the veil diaphanous or even transparent—a possibility affirmed by the famous *ḥadīth qudsī* according to which God Himself becomes the hearing with which His servant hears, the sight with which he sees, the hand with which he strikes, and the foot with which he walks.[88] As Nasr explains it: "The miracle of human existence is that man can undo the existentiating and cosmogonic process inwardly so as to cease to exist; man can experience that 'annihilation' (the *fanāʾ* of the Sufis) which enables him to experience union in the ultimate sense."[89] And while it is true that Islam's status as a path of moderation (*wasaṭiyya*) places providential limitations upon the outward unveiling of such realization, there were nevertheless exceptions that proved the rule, to say nothing of the immense spiritual radiance of the Prophet.

Now, if the highest possibilities of the human state involve the attenuation or even rending of the cosmic veil, the lowest possibilities involve its thickening to the point of absurdity, or, alternatively, its thinning in a way that is extraordinary but illicit or false. An example of the first would be the general ambience of a civilization in which the good is conceived of exclusively in material terms, and

85 Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 190, 197.

86 See Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 141.

87 For the most forceful and profound elaboration of Nasr's anthropology, see Nasr, "Man, Pontifical and Promethean," in Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, chapter 5.

88 See, e.g., Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 38, 128.

89 Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 326.

an example of the second would be the phenomena associated with the end times in various religious traditions—one thinks, for instance, of the experiential possibilities afforded by certain drugs, or of the wonders that will be performed by the Antichrist according to various prophetic narrations in Islam.[90]

As for the commission of genuinely wicked acts by individuals—and to return to the notion of the normative limits intrinsic to the human state—it is perhaps best understood in this context with the aid of geometrical symbolism, namely that of the circle. Given the fact that the microcosm and macrocosm mirror each other, one can imagine both the human state and the cosmos in their integrality as being each comprised of a series of concentric circles, with the center points symbolizing the human body and the corporeal plane of existence, respectively. Moving out from the center in all directions, the ontological modality of each world—human and cosmic—becomes increasingly subtle (moving in the "direction" of the immaterial) until one reaches the outermost circle, which in reality constitutes an unreachable limit. In man, the upward limit rejoins his innermost center, symbolized by the heart, where man is mysteriously capable of meeting his Lord; the lower limit represents his ability to sink to the "lowest of the low," in Quranic terms;[91] and the lateral limits represent the possibility of indefinite wandering—of spiritual lukewarmness, one might say—at least until the time of death. As for the cosmos, the upward limit indicates the divine Throne, the lower limit nothingness, and the lateral limits symbolize the indefinitude of manifestation, which reflects the infinitude of its Principle.[92]

Now, insofar as man is a creature, it is not possible for him to traverse all the levels of reality, regardless of the direction in which he sets off. Moving upward, in spiritual ascent, it is required of him that he progressively cast off his own limitations—a journey culminating in the abandonment of his very self, or in his dying before death.[93] Moving horizontally, the horizon recedes endlessly until he gives up and turns back out of fatigue or else gets stranded. And moving downward, in disobedience, his stubborn refusal to overcome himself, or his willful persistence in following his own desires without restraint and apart from any awareness of God, results in increasingly severe deformations of his inward substance the further he pushes down into darkness, as it were. When traveling upwards, each successive boundary is crossed via a death, in an aeviternal moment. But moving downwards, self-assertively clinging to life renders each boundary substantial. And just as physically colliding with something produces temporary disfigurement of the body, or extreme forms of physical exertion cause contortions in the

90 A veil can of course be either predominantly inward or predominantly outward in nature.

91 See Q 95:5.

92 For the metaphysical meaning of indefinitude, see René Guénon, "Infinite and Indefinite," in *The Metaphysical Principles of the Infinitesimal Calculus*, trans. Michael Allen and Henry D. Fohr; ed. Samuel D. Fohr (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2003), chapter 1.

93 The injunction "die before you die," which Nasr cites with some frequency, has been attributed to the Prophet of Islam. See, e.g., Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 22–23; Nasr, *Need for a Sacred Science*, 33.

face, likewise does straining against the moral limits of the human state lead to grotesque caricatures of man's inherent qualities, and this really is the key to understanding how something that is most fundamentally defined negatively as the absence of something else is able to appear so convincingly as though it possessed reality in its own right.

To tie the foregoing together, man as vicegerent exists in a world of veils, and he himself is a veil. The more he fulfills the highest purpose of his existence by dying spiritually, the more transparent he becomes to the light of God's perfections. But the more he rebels against this purpose, the more his reflection of this light takes on a lurid or even abominable quality on account of the absurdity of the nothing's violent assertion of itself as though it were something, or of what amounts to "playing God." If evil often appears to us as an active force in the world, it is because the metaphysical opacity of the evil person obscures the true source of whatever power or presence appears in him, albeit by way of abuse and dissipation.[94] It is perhaps for this reason—the fact that the Light is one—that Meister Eckhart spoke of the blasphemer's praising God,[95] and that, in the language of the Quran, "there is no thing, save that it hymns His praise, though you do not understand their praise" (17:44).

Oneness and Totality

We saw earlier that Nasr explains the presence of evil in the world as a necessary concomitant of cosmogenesis. As he says, "To use the very term *world* implies already separation from God . . . [and] what we call evil is the result of this withdrawal and separation."[96] Taking this doctrine for granted, we then posed the question of whether the world might not have *less* evil in it than it does, or only certain types or degrees of evil. Surely, as mentioned, the postulate of human freedom is indispensable to any cogent response to this question. But we could have probed the initial cosmological picture a bit more, as it is not immediately apparent why separation would have to manifest itself as evil on any given level of reality, since celestial modes of existence and freedom of will in the most general sense are not mutually exclusive, to say the least.[97] Thinking in terms of geometrical symbolism again, could not the emanation of the cosmos, which can be envisaged as proceeding spherically out from its originary Center, have been halted before the

94 It is interesting that, in Arabic, the root of the word for unbelief or religious infidelity (*kufr*, from k-f-r) means to cover or hide, and the root of the adjective used to describe the false messiah or Antichrist (*dajjāl*, from d-j-l) means to deceive or misrepresent.

95 See Meister Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, trans. and ed. Maurice O.C. Walshe (New York: Crossroad, 2009), 26; Meister Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, trans. Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 216.

96 Nasr, *Garden of Truth*, 54.

97 One might also wonder about the distinction between evil and badness more generally, for which see Nasr, "Absence of the Good," 135.

conditions for the appearance of evil were met? Why did God not just make the world unambiguously paradisal from the start?

The most profound and purely metaphysical answer to this question is simply that God is one, for oneness implies totality. But one could also say, slightly less elliptically, that to say God is to say world, and to say world is to say man. As we have already seen, God creates because it is in His nature to do so, or because He is who He is, and His creation includes man on pain of the name *Allāh* not receiving its rights, so to speak. Furthermore, the world, which is finite, must be so indefinitely, since otherwise the sphere of the cosmos would be limited by nothingness, which is absurd. It would be as though the abovementioned logical possibility of a kind of paradisal orb were to be suspended in a void, with its inhabitants being able to stroll along its boundary and peer out into emptiness.[98] But such a world could not contain man, since the very nature of man is distinguished from the natures of other things precisely by its mysterious ability to encompass the extremes of manifested existence within itself—from nothing properly so-called to the "nothingness" of the Divine. So the world contains moral evil—including its most abhorrent forms—because it contains man, and it contains man because principial oneness demands manifested totality.

Now as satisfying as such explanations may be for readers who are predisposed to find traditional metaphysical doctrines compelling, some might wonder at what are liable to appear as cavalier appeals to necessity. When one studies metaphysics, it quickly becomes apparent that much hinges on the notion of necessity, which, after all, is intimately linked with that of truth. In saying that infinitude entails finitude, or that oneness demands totality, how should these metaphysical modes of implication be understood? Can things be other than they are? What is the relationship between necessity, possibility, and freedom? In the context of the problem of evil, God is absolved of evil by the freedom of man, but the nature of man is nevertheless determined by God. It is thus that theodicy is, as Nasr has noted, closely related to the problem of free will and predestination,[99] to which we now turn.

In Nasr's metaphysics, God is both pure necessity and pure freedom, and since only God is absolute, only He possesses these attributes in an absolute manner.[100] In the human domain, by contrast, there can be neither absolute necessity nor absolute freedom, since the world is relative by definition.[101] According to Nasr, the oneness of freedom and necessity on the divine level manifests itself as mutual limitation on the level of relativity. Man, then, is neither fully determined

98 From this point of view, the vastness of the physical universe reflects the fathomless interiority of man.

99 Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 146.

100 Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 146.

101 Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 146.

nor fully free. Given the beauty of Nasr's exposition here, it is worth reproducing at some length:

> Man's freedom is as real as himself. He ceases to be free in the sense of independent of the Divine Will to the extent that he ceases to be separated ontologically from God. At the same time, man is determined and not free to the extent that an ontological hiatus separates him from his Source and Origin, for only God is freedom. Journeying from the relative toward the Absolute means at once losing the freedom of living in error and gaining freedom from the tyranny of all the psycho-material determinations which imprison and stifle the soul. In God there is pure freedom and pure necessity and only in Him is man completely free and also completely determined but with a determination which, being nothing but man's own most profound nature and the root of his being, is none other than the other face of freedom, total and unconditional.[102]

Regarding the relationship between the question of free will and predestination and the problem of evil, understanding it requires specifying the exact meanings of necessity and freedom as they relate to both God and man. Metaphysically speaking, necessity refers simply to Reality's being what It is, and freedom refers to Its illimitability. God exists by His very nature, and because He does not change, He cannot not be. Relying upon nothing, therefore, and possessing no partners in virtue of His oneness, God is exalted above anything that could place a limit upon His freedom. As for man, all of whose endowments of course come from God, his participation in divine freedom transpires within the limits of a predetermined destiny, since the changelessness and perfection of the Divine entail everything's already being accomplished in reality. From this lofty point of view, or at this level, which in theoretical Sufism is called *wāḥidiyya*, or oneness as inclusive of manyness, things simply are what they are, with the upshot for human freedom being that a person is only ever free to become what he or she always already is on the level of his or her unmanifested individuality. In this doctrine, which in the Islamic world found its most profound expression in the writings of Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240) and his followers, the objects of God's knowledge are uncreated (*ghayr majʿūl*), and insofar as they enter into manifestation, God in His justice bestows upon them that which their own natures demand—no more and no less.[103]

Thus, if someone were to accept that it is man and not God who is responsible for moral evil but then wonder why God makes human nature to be what it is, one

102 Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 146. See also Nasr, *Islamic Life and Thought*, 17.

103 See, e.g., Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī, *al-Nuṣūṣ*, ed. Ibrāhīm Ibrāhīm Muḥammad Yāsīn (Alexandria: Munshaʾat al-Maʿārif, 2003), 52. Chittick has made his expert translation of this remarkable text available online: www.williamcchittick.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Sadr_al-Din_Qunawi_The_Texts_al-Nusus.pdf (last accessed October 10, 2022).

answer is simply that human nature is not something made. God does not create the objects of His own knowledge; rather, He simply knows what He knows. It is also helpful to recall here the concept of divine wisdom for the obvious reason that, as already mentioned, man does not possess God's measures. In the context of Islam, one is reminded of the Quranic passage in which the angels question God's decision to make man His representative on earth: "And when thy Lord said to the angels, 'I am placing a vicegerent upon the earth,' they said, 'Wilt Thou place therein one who will work corruption therein, and shed blood, while we hymn Thy praise and call Thee Holy?' He said, 'Truly I know what you know not.' And He taught Adam the names, all of them" (2:30–31). All things—their good and their evil—are determined from the start, but man is free to fail to appreciate the fact, in which case he lives beneath himself and suffers on account of his ignorance. Being thus estranged from the paradise of his own primordial nature, which participates in divine knowledge, he forfeits his supreme opportunity, which is to abandon even that for God Himself, in whom alone evil is seen to have never really been.

Closing Remark

In his influential *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, the 17th-century philosopher Pierre Bayle (d. 1706) declared the presence of evil in a world created by a perfect divinity to be "not only inexplicable, but also incomprehensible."[104] As he explained, "All that can be opposed to the reasons why this being has allowed evil agrees more with the natural light and the ideas of order than do the reasons themselves."[105] Writing as he was on the cusp of the Enlightenment, Bayle's conclusion is unsurprising given the ascendance of a modus operandi that divorced reason from intellect not just in its most profound, purely Platonic sense, but even as it was somewhat more modestly understood by the scholastics (i.e., as a non-discursive faculty of contemplation).[106]

Given the degree to which the emergence of agnostic and atheistic approaches to the problem of evil was bound up historically with what are arguably severely impoverished epistemologies, this examination of Seyyed Hossein Nasr's metaphysical theodicy placed much emphasis on the gnostic heart of his integral theory of knowledge. For Nasr, it is not that gnosis affords access to truths about which God remains silent in His revelations. Rather, the crucial distinction is between

104 Pierre Bayle, *Historical and Critical Dictionary: Selections*, trans. Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991), 169.

105 Bayle, *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, 169.

106 I take the terms faculty and contemplation here to connote individuality and embodiment, albeit with the understanding that, as Aquinas taught, the activity of *intellectus* constitutes a human participation in angelic cognition. It is also worth noting that Aristotle's hylomorphism does not prevent him from affirming the separability and essential independence of intellect. See, respectively, Rik Van Nieuwenhove, "Contemplation, Intellectus, and Simplex Intuitus in Aquinas: Recovering a Neoplatonic Theme," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 91, no. 2 (2017): 199–225; Lloyd P. Gerson, *Aristotle and Other Platonists* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 152–172.

mediated and unmediated forms of knowing, since it is through neglect of the imperatives of the latter that scriptural exegesis risks losing touch with the deepest meanings contained in any given revealed text. From Nasr's point of view, it is not necessary to be a metaphysician nor, a fortiori, a realized saint to have "justified true belief" in God. On the contrary, in his conception of tradition, the continued radiation of the intellective heart of an integrally traditional civilization suffices to illuminate the totality of its aspects and dimensions. It is thus that even simple believers are blessed with participation in the certainties of the tradition as a whole. In the case of Islam, one imagines the happy end of those who with a full heart took God and His Prophet at their word, for "paradise is surrounded by hardships," and "truly with hardship comes ease" (Q 94:5–6).[107]

References

al-Qūnawī, Ṣadr al-Dīn. *al-Nuṣūṣ*. Edited by Ibrāhīm Ibrāhīm Muḥammad Yāsīn. Alexandria: Munshaʾat al-Maʿārif, 2003.

al-Qūnawī, Ṣadr al-Dīn. *The Texts*. Translated by William C. Chittick. www.williamcchittick.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Sadr_al-Din_Qunawi_The_Texts_al-Nusus.pdf (last accessed October 10, 2022).

Bayle, Pierre. *Historical and Critical Dictionary: Selections*. Translated by Richard H. Popkin. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "The Idea of Provincializing Europe." In *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, introduction. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Eckhart, Meister. *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*. Translated by Bernard McGinn. New York: Paulist Press, 1986.

Eckhart, Meister. *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*. Translated and edited by Maurice O. C. Walshe. New York: Crossroad, 2009.

Gerson, Lloyd P. *Aristotle and Other Platonists*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005.

Guénon, René. "Infinity and Possibility." In *The Multiple States of the Being*, translated by Henry D. Fohr; edited by Samuel D. Fohr, chapter 1. Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2001.

Guénon, René. *Introduction to the Study of the Hindu Doctrines*. Translated by Marco Pallis. Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2001.

Guénon, René. "Infinite and Indefinite." In *The Metaphysical Principles of the Infinitesimal Calculus*, translated by Michael Allen and Henry D. Fohr; edited by Samuel D. Fohr, chapter 1. Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2003.

Hickson, Michael W. "A Brief History of Problems of Evil." In *The Blackwell Companion to The Problem of Evil*, edited by Justin P. McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Snyder, chapter 1. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated and edited by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Lakhani, M. Ali. *The Timeless Relevance of Traditional Wisdom*. Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2010.

107 "Hardships" in the Hadith translates *makārih* (sing. *makrah*), which most literally means things that are loathed or hated but can also mean adversities, hardships, etc.

Mignolo, Walter D., and Catherine E. Walsh. "Eurocentrism and Coloniality: The Question of Totality of Knowledge." In *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*, edited by Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, chapter 9. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018.

Muller-Ortega, Paul Eduaro. *The Triadic Heart of Śiva: Kaula Tantricism of Abhinavagupta in the Non-Dual Shaivism of Kashmir*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1989.

Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. *Knowledge and the Sacred*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1989.

Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. *The Need for a Sacred Science*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1993.

Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man*. Chicago: ABC International Group, 2001.

Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. *Islamic Life and Thought*. Chicago: ABC International Group, 2001.

Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. "The Heart of the Faithful Is the Throne of the All-Merciful." In *Paths to the Heart: Sufism and the Christian East*, edited by James S. Cutsinger, 32–45. Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2004.

Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. *The Heart of Islam*. New York: HarperOne, 2004.

Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. "Introduction." In *The Essential Frithjof Schuon*, edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, 1–64. Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2005.

Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. *The Essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr*. Edited by William Chittick. Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2007.

Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. "Evil as the Absence of the Good." In *Voices of the Spirit*, edited by Vincent J. Cornell, vol. 2, 131–138. Westport: Praeger, 2007.

Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. *The Garden of Truth*. New York: HarperOne, 2007.

Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, Caner K. Dagli, Maria Massi Dakake, Joseph E. B. Lumbard, and Mohammed Rustom (eds.). *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*. New York: HarperOne, 2015.

Oldmeadow, Harry. *Journeys East: 20th Century Western Encounters with Eastern Religious Traditions*. Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2004.

Oliver, Paul. *Hinduism and the 1960s: The Rise of a Counter-Culture*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014.

O'Rourke, Fran. *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas*. Leiden: Brill, 1992.

Plato. *Theaetetus*. Translated by M. J. Levett, revised by Myles Burnyeat. In *Complete Works*, edited by John Cooper and D. S. Hutchinson, 158–234. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997.

Schuon, Frithjof. "In the Wake of the Fall." In *Science and the Myth of Progress*, edited by Mehrdad M. Zarandi, 1–27. Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2003.

Shah-Kazemi, Reza. "The Notion and Significance of *Maʿrifa* in Sufism." *Oxford Journal of Islamic Studies* 13, no. 2 (2002): 155–181.

Shah-Kazemi, Reza. *Paths to Transcendence: According to Shankara, Ibn Arabi, and Meister Eckhart*. Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2006.

Shipley, Morgan. *Psychedelic Mysticism: Transforming Consciousness, Religious Experiences, and Visionary Peasants in Postwar America*. London: Lexington Books, 2015.

Van Nieuwenhove, Rik. "Contemplation, Intellectus, and Simplex Intuitus in Aquinas: Recovering a Neoplatonic Theme." *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 91, no. 2 (2017): 199–225.